

The problem with big technology visions



BY JIM CARROLL

Convergence—now, that's a buzzword that has almost reached the mythical "whack-a-mole" status. No matter how often people dismiss it, it keeps on coming back again and again

One of the challenges in dealing with the world of digital marketing is trying to figure out where one should invest time and energy.

After all, despite the current high-tech doom and gloom, it would seem there should be lots of areas worth focusing attention on. Indeed, the digital world is one that is surrounded by a cornucopia of new developments, initiatives and directions, with a constant bombardment of announcements, visions and strategies.

So how do you figure out where to focus in terms of learning, career decisions or training? It's quite simple; follow my two-part rule. First, as soon as any big technology company begins to talk about a "big vision," realize that what they plan on doing won't actually come about. And second, as soon as a word or phrase gains buzzword status, run like hell. Follow that simple guidance, and you'll best be able to judge where to focus your efforts.

Big visions and big plans are a dime a dozen and are usually the fabrication of public relations folks with too much time on their hands. Big visions never come together for any number of reasons, the most important of which is that technology is inherently unreliable. Why is that so? Because humans are the ones who are supposed to make technology work and, well, we make lots of mistakes.

Let's put this rule into perspective by taking a current example: Microsoft.Net. If you spend any time at all in the world of digital marketing, or digital anything, you'll be hearing all

about Microsoft.Net. It's the company's vision for how a Microsoft-centric Internet will evolve into the ultimate digital nirvana. As I understand it, it's a world in which a whole bunch of Microsoft computer code and on-line services will automatically link your cellphone to your computer and to your airline, your car and your fridge. You'll have to provide a whole bunch of personal details in order to become part of this Net universe. But once that's done, you'll be able to instantly schedule a meeting with friends in your backyard swimming pool while you are 35,000 feet in the air, because all of the devices that surround you in your day-to-day life are going to link to each other and have little Microsoft.conversations.

Or something like that.

Now, I find the whole concept of ".Net" really funny, given that Microsoft isn't known for developing computer systems that are in any way reliable. Why? Well, I'm writing this article just as Microsoft enters its sixth day of an MSN Messenger service outage. The system crashed, and Microsoft is having a devil of a time fixing it. Of course, it's had a devil of a time fixing all the problems it's had with Windows, MSN, Hotmail and its Internet Web server.

That's why Microsoft.Net is comical when you think about it. The company is going to develop a massively integrated global information system that will allow us to easily manage all aspects of our daily lives through multiple devices? And we believe that it can do this, when it can't

even make a lot of its current technology work right?

But it's a great "big vision." It sounds wonderful at a conference. Listen to someone from Microsoft rhapsodize about .Net, and it's positively digitally orgasmic!

Now don't get me wrong, Microsoft isn't the only guilty party here. Indeed, every technology company suffers from the fact that their PR folks can spin a great story about a great vision, but the technology guys can't make it work. The entire history of information technology is littered with disaster, and we can expect countless disasters in the years to come. So don't hold your breath on the success of big technology visions.

The thing is, we've been here before. Remember way back in 1994, when everyone was talking about the "information superhighway?" At that time, Bell Canada had a big vision called the "Beacon Initiative." It was to be the foundation to a multimedia universe, a massive national digital world running on Bell wires that would promote knowledge, cure the common cold and cause national unity to blossom overnight. Except, right around that time, the Internet was emerging from the grassroots to become the de facto information highway, and nary a word was heard about the Beacon Initiative mere months later. A big vision, but one with a short life.

Part of the problem with big visions is that they are often based on the "next big thing" way of thinking that has come to dominate the world of technology. You would think that people would have learned that we've

seen buzzword after buzzword that has, in the end, proven to be something of completely vacuous potential. Don't believe me? Then let me go through a laundry list of buzzwords: Push. Online shopping. B2B. E-marketplaces. Convergence.

Ah, convergence. Now, there's a buzzword that has almost reached the mythical "whack-a-mole" status. No matter how often people dismiss it, it keeps on coming back again and again. It's the Energizer Bunny of digital.

That's why whenever I hear about convergence, I remember the words of Marc Andreessen, the founder of Netscape Communications, when he commented on the concept of "convergence" from the viewpoint of interactive television: "Whenever anyone says 'convergence,' reach for your wallet... The whole concept that people will want to interact with their television set is silly. Interactive television happens when your football team loses, and you pitch a beer can at the screen."

All too often, people get seduced by sexy little buzzwords that seem to promote some sort of magical digital future. The buzzwords get mixed together in a PR soup of mammoth proportions to such an extent that people actually begin to believe that the buzzword and the big vision behind it represent the future.

And time after time, people learn, often all too late, that most big visions and buzzwords simply fail.

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